

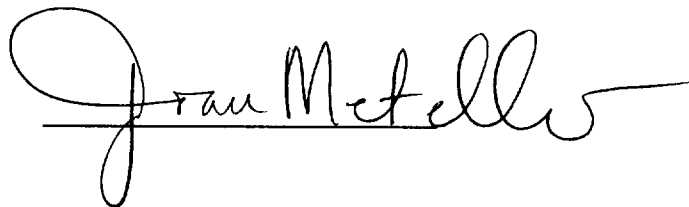
Emily Dickinson as Both Poetess and Songstress:
Poems of Emily Dickinson Set to Music

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Joan Metelli", written over a horizontal line.

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74
This lecture recital discusses seven Emily Dickinson poems that have been set to music by twentieth century composers. After discussing the musical qualities inherent in Dickinson's poetry, the lecture goes on to show how these qualities have been interpreted and underscored by the four composers. The purpose of the recital is to enable the listener to actually experience the parallel message created by the combination of poetry and music. Within the lecture, there is a performance of musical examples, excerpts from each of the pieces. This is done to show key moments in which the poetry and music convey the same message; its purpose is also to give concrete examples of what is being discussed during the lecture. The recital concludes with the performance of each work in its entirety, enabling the listener to enjoy the combined effect of poetry and music.

FAMILY DICKINSON: POETESS, SONGSTRESS
HONORS THESIS RECITAL
LISA BREWSAUGH
NOVEMBER 1, 1992
HAZELWOOD CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Lecture and Musical Examples

Lisa Brewsaugh

I'm Nobody

Leonard Berkowitz

*Cindy Roman and Lori Seitz, soprano
Lisa Brewsaugh and Amanda Kitchens, alto
Erik Blundell, tenor
Bryce Mallernee and Eric Schmiegel, bass*

Intoxication (I taste a liquor never brewed)

*Robert Ward
1917-*

*There came a Wind like a Bugle
Why..do they shut me out of Heaven?
Sleep is supposed to be
I felt a funeral, in my Brain*

*Aaron Copland
1900-1990*

*Lisa Brewsaugh, soprano
Eric Schmiegel, piano*

Heart! We will forget him!

James Mulholland

*Eric Schmiegel, piano
William Kovach, trombone
Selected women from Ball State University*

Lisa Brewsaugh is a senior at Ball State University, majoring in English Education and minoring in Choral Music. She has been a recipient of the Presidential Scholarship from September of 1988 until May of 1992, and is an Elizabeth Martin Scholar. Lisa has also been active in the Ball State Chamber Choir, as well as Ball State Opera Workshop. Currently, Lisa is student teaching at Wes-Del Middle and High School. She is a former student of Dr. Joan Merelli, who acts also as her advisor for this Honors Thesis Recital.

“*My business is to sing,*” Emily Dickinson has said of herself. The average citizen may readily agree with this, as many of our English teachers have maintained that most of Emily Dickinson’s poems can be sung to the tune “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” On a deeper level, terms such as rhythm, tone, style, mood, and theme are used to describe both poetry and music. In the past, poetry and song were in fact one art, sung by a mystic muse or a roving bard. Now, poetry and music are two distinct art forms: being taught in separate departments, being read and sung by different people.

Yet Judy Jo Small has called attention to Dickinson’s poetry as having exquisite linguistic and musical content: “The music of poetry is elusive, to be sure. Especially because Dickinson’s linguistic music differs from common poetic practice, our ears must be attuned to hear it. But it is time to recognize that music is an essential part of the architectonics of her poetry” (Small 70). Small also brings to light Dickinson’s own attention to her vocation as both poetess and songstress:

The prominence in her poetry of sound and music, both as content and as acoustic texture, merits far more attention. Her poems often rely on auditory images. . . She writes repeatedly about the effects of sound on the hearer. And her poems and letters indicate not only that she had a keen auditory sensitivity but also that she had given thought to the ways sound conveys meaning (30).

As Dickinson’s poetry was modern for her time, it only seems fitting that many modern composers would use her poetry as lyrics for their songs. This transformation from poetry to lyrics is an easy one; Dickinson’s language is readily shaped into melodies that still retain thematic value. The composers I have chosen: the well known Aaron Copland and Robert Ward, and the lesser known James Mulholland and Leonard Berkowitz, used Dickinson’s poetry in their classical compositions. Whether sung by a soloist or a group, Dickinson’s language shines in each of these pieces.

When a composer decides to put a text to music, his attention is suddenly split. He has to decide whether his music will reflect the language and the mood of the text.

If he decides to match the two, he has a much more difficult task at hand. These composers I have selected have all decided to undertake this endeavor. Each composer has tried to convey Dickinson's intended mood, emphasis, and meaning through music, which makes Dickinson's statement that much more powerful. Poetry and music have again become one through their efforts.

In the transfer from book to sheet music, some words have been lost, added, or changed. Also, there are differing versions of Dickinson's poems, so "pray tell me" has become "please tell me," and "they'd advertise" has become "they'd banish us." These minor word changes or substitutions have little effect on the total impact of the pieces.

In the first piece, "I'm Nobody!," Leonard Berkowitz reflects the speaker's excited mood in this poem arguing the benefits of being unknown.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you--Nobody--Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise--you know!

How dreary--to be--Somebody!
How public--like a Frog--
To tell one's name--the livelong June--
To an admiring Bog! (133).

Berkowitz accentuates Dickinson's short, almost neurotic lines, by writing the choral parts in short, jumpy phrases. The poem's short lines also convey a chattering, nervous speaker; Berkowitz creates a quick tempo to keep with this impression. In the first two lines, "I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you nobody, too?," Berkowitz has each of the four parts begin in the same rhythm, but later the voices branch off into different rhythms, communicating a sense of various voices exclaiming their individuality. Yet at the end of this excited phrase, Berkowitz slows the tempo, and the soprano voice is left alone, crying a questioning "Nobody?" Thus a mood of frenzied secrecy is created, with a lonely, empty undertone. See musical example #1.

The secrecy continues, with the speaker renouncing the dreariness of being a "somebody," declaring it extremely public. Berkowitz continues the nervous energy by rhythmically accentuating words and phrases in eighth and sixteenth notes such as, "a pair of us," "they'd banish us," and "dreary." The poem ends with the speaker comparing the public life of a somebody to a frog's life, declaring his name to an admiring bog. Berkowitz captures the "dreariness" and boredom of this analogy by writing a very simple choral progression, with the rhythm in conventional quarter notes to end the piece. The speaker convinces us of the intriguing, though very private, life of a "nobody." As Dickinson was herself a recluse, her opinion is an informed one.

Robert Ward pens the next piece, featuring the most well-known poem by Dickinson in this recital, "I taste a liquor never brewed."

I taste a liquor never brewed--
 From Tankards scooped in Pearl--
 Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
 Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air--am I--
 And Debauchee of dew--
 Reeling--thro endless summer days--
 From inns of Molten Blue--

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
 Out of the Foxglove's door--
 When Butterflies--renounce their "drams"--
 I shall but drink the more!

'Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats--
 And Saints--to windows run--
 To see the little Tippler
 Leaning against the--Sun-- (98).

This jubilant poem gains a new vibrancy through Ward's musical interpretation. The vocal line begins in clear confidence that continues through the supposed "intoxication." This drunkenness begins in the second stanza, and is present until the

fourth stanza. Ward uses the melody as a vehicle to show the "intoxication," especially in the words "inebriate" and "reeling through endless summer days." See musical example #2.

Later, Ward employs chromaticism to show drunkenness; the melodic line becomes tipsy as it tries to balance itself on falling half steps. The vocal line builds and climaxes on the declaration: "I shall but drink the more!" The first verse theme is resumed in the fourth and final verse; Ward does this by making the vocal line similar as well as returning to the original tempo. Yet the excitement and wonder in nature continues as the song builds to the final, triumphant line: "To see the little Tippler Leaning against the Sun!"

The next four solo pieces are taken from Twelve Poems by Emily Dickinson, a song cycle by Aaron Copland written in 1951. The first song, "There came a wind like a bugle," is the second in the cycle.

There came a Wind like a Bugle--
 It quivered through the Grass
 And a Green Chill upon the Heat
 So ominous did pass
 We barred the Windows and the Doors
 As from an Emerald Ghost--
 The Doom's electric Moccasin
 That very instant passed--
 On a strange Mob of panting Trees
 And Fences fled away
 And Rivers where the Houses ran
 Those looked that lived--that Day--
 The Bell within the steeple wild
 The flying tidings told--
 How much can come
 And much can go,
 And yet abide the World! (659).

Copland immediately creates a picture with words and music. He begins the piece with a blustery introduction and writes the first vocal line with rising notes,

ending with a musical onomatopoeia on the word "bugle." See musical example #3.

Copland creates a notion of alarm with a vigorous accompaniment and a free, wind-like vocal line. Rhythmically, Copland accentuates words such as "quivered," "ominous," "electric," and "moccasin." The piece moves with a steady rhythm, but then accelerates, as the meter moves from simple to compound. This gives the feeling that the wind has increased and now is making Dickinson's world swing to and fro. This feeling become especially noticeable in the line "the Bell within the steeple wild the flying tidings whirled." Yet Copland stops the wind, just as Dickinson does in her poem as she makes the final, general statement: "How much can come and much can go, and yet abide the World!" Copland slows the tempo, freezes the accompaniment with a chord, and writes a majestic and final vocal line to close the piece.

The next poem, "Why do they shut Me out of Heaven?," is both humorous and child-like. Copland underscores the mock timidity and humor in this short, quaint piece.

Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing--too loud?
But--I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me--
Just--once--more--
Just--see--if I troubled them--
But don't--shut the door!

Oh, if I--were the Gentlemen
In the "White Robe"--
And they--were the little Hand--that knocked--
Could--I--forbid? (113).

Copland compliments this deceptively simple poem by beginning the song with a single pitch in four octaves. These octaves are held until the vocalist sings her first line, unaccompanied, for all to pay attention. As the singer questions, "Did I sing too

loud?," Copland ends the question with an obvious opportunity for the soprano to loudly project a G, underscoring the comedy of the question.

As Dickinson changes her forward tactics to more subtle ones by using the word "but," Copland writes a fermata above a rest to indicate a thoughtful pause. Copland then continues the piece with a timid, yet pressing, vocal line. As the speaker asks, "Wouldn't the angels try me just once more?," Copland compliments the line by writing a whining, hopeful melody. Yet as the speaker in the poem becomes indignant as she sees the doors of heaven closing, Copland makes the vocal more dramatic by increasing the tempo and adding syncopation.

As the speaker looks inward in the second stanza, trying to discover what she would do if she were an angel, Copland changes the mood. The music becomes serene, contemplating. Arriving at the self-searching question, "Could I forbid?," Copland chooses to repeat the line, as if to increase the drama as well as to indicate deep thought. See musical example #4.

Copland takes a small liberty at the end of the piece, repeating the first two lines of the poem, "Why do they shut me out of heaven? Did I sing too loud?" However, the ending note is even higher than the last: "loud" becomes "louder" as the G moves up to an A flat. While the Dickinson poem ends in a contemplating question, Copland decides to make the speaker more of a rebellious type, daring to sing even louder up to the place that forbids her.

"Sleep is supposed to be" is a poem in which the speaker tells of the socially accepted definitions of phenomena such as "sleep" and "morning." Yet the speaker herself has a decidedly different view.

Sleep is supposed to be
By souls of sanity
The shutting of the eye.

Sleep is the station grand
Down which, on either hand
The hosts of witness stand!

Morn is supposed to be
By people of degree
The breaking of the Day.

Morning has not occurred!
That shall Aurora be--
East of Eternity--
One with the banner gay--
One in the red array--
That is the break of Day! (12).

To create a mood conducive to the subject of sleep, Copland begins this piece with a dream-like, unsteady accompaniment. The vocal line begins in a slow, calm rhythm which makes the listener pay attention to the information being presented and weighed. As the speaker tells what the “souls of sanity” and the “people of degree” think, Copland inserts an exceedingly normal major chord to precede the opinions “the shutting of the eye” and “the breaking of the day.” This effect underscores these socially accepted views. See musical examples #5 and #6.

When the speaker is giving her opinions of sleep and morning, she is much more forthright. In the poem, there are exclamation points to illustrate this; in the song, there are higher notes and a louder dynamic to show boldness. The speaker then becomes extremely indignant beginning at the “Morning has not occurred!” line. Copland illustrates this by changing the meter, again raising the dynamic, this time to a fortissimo, and writing the notes higher and higher to peak on a B flat. The speaker continues to rave about her definition of morning and the mood of the piece changes from adamant to proud. Finally, the accompaniment stops, making it all clear for the speaker to reaffirm, “*That* is the break of day!”

The final solo piece, “I felt a funeral in my brain,” is a popular poem about one of

Dickinson's popular subjects, death.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading--treading--till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through--

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum--
Kept beating--beating--till I thought
My Mind was going numb--
And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space--began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here-- (128).

Copland superbly illustrates this piece by creating a dark, heavy, and foreboding accompaniment. He also stresses beats one and three to create a funeral march rhythm. As the words "treading--treading" occur, Copland further accentuates the already emphasized words by repeating them once more as well as repeating the notes on which they are sung. He uses this same tactic later, when the poem speaks of the funeral service "beating--beating" like a drum. Not only does this enliven the words "treading" and "beating," it makes the speaker seem tormented.

The treading occurring in the first stanza is included in the line: "Kept treading--treading--till it seemed that sense was breaking through." Copland makes the "breaking through seem real as he writes a ritard and a dramatic, ascending vocal line. See musical example #7.

As the poem's mood changes in the next stanza, so does the song by a change in tempo. The accompaniment begins this next section with heavy bass notes on the

first beat of each measure. The vocalist imitates this by accenting the first words in the measure. The line “Till I thought my mind was going numb” is written in descending half steps, creating a feeling of frustration or even insanity on the part of the speaker. See musical example #8.

Copland changes the key at this point, making the speaker seem more impassioned as she realizes her predicament. The speaker gradually discovers the immense silence around her as she is buried: “And I, and Silence, some strange Race Wrecked, solitary, here--.” Copland emphasizes this new loneliness by slowing the tempo and decreasing the forte dynamic to piano. The vocal line is also written lower, as if the speaker has lost all confidence, looking around in darkness and silence. The last word “here” is very uncertain and occurs on the offbeat. The song ends with this lonely, uneasy feeling. The accompaniment still is playing on the strong beats, but the notes are lower and become gradually softer as if the mourners’ footsteps were retreating, leaving the speaker totally alone.

The final song and poem, “Heart! We will forget him!,” is one of Dickinson’s obscure love poems that reveal her romantic feelings.

Heart! We will forget him!
 You and I--tonight!
 You may forget the warmth he gave--
 I will forget the light!

When you have done, pray tell me
 That I may straight begin!
 Haste! lest while you're lagging
 I remember him! (26).

Of all the pieces presented this evening, this one takes the most liberty with the text. James Mulholland wrote the piece for women’s voices in 1985, paying careful attention to the mood and language of each line of the poem.

The accompaniment begins with the piano playing pulsing chords, giving the

impression of a heartbeat. The mood is calm and melancholy as the singers begin in unison at a piano dynamic. The singers linger on the words “you and I” as if they would rather remember, but they continue a tempo at the word “tonight” as if they have “regained their common sense” and will complete this business of forgetting with no distractions.

The speaker of the poem delegates authority to her heart, giving her the job of forgetting “the warmth he gave.” Mulholland shows how the speaker is remembering the warmth by writing a crescendo. The speaker herself is to forget “the light.” The singers also linger on these words, showing that they are still tender in the speaker’s memory.

The second section of the song has a slightly faster tempo, but repeats the first verse, indicating that the speaker is more determined to get this business over with. The accompaniment changes to arpeggios, revealing a faster heartbeat. Mulholland writes a pause at the end of this section to anticipate the change of mood occurring in the third section.

This third section, beginning with the lines “when you have done please tell me,” is yet faster, and we hear in the singers’ lines a sense of urgency. Now the speaker seems emotionally involved, though she started out practical. In the line “Haste! lest while you’re lagging,” “Haste” is personified by being a short, bitten-off note. Predictably, “lagging” has a fermata, further contrasting the two antonyms.

Though the line appears to read “lest while you’re lagging I remember him” so that the speaker would remember him if the heart waited too long, Mulholland writes as if the speaker is already remembering. The sopranos, or the head, admit to remembering, and then the altos, the heart, echo the confession. See musical example #9.

The song continues with a repeat of the second verse, again showing the

urgency of the speaker. At the end of this fourth section, the dynamics increase until the singers reach the word "him." This effect is a declaration that *he* brings the passion.

The fifth section is written with very full voicings and is sung at a fortissimo, unveiling the true passion. The speaker seems to be crying in the effort to forget the unnamed "him." Mulholland chooses to repeat "forget him, forget him" as if the speaker is begging this of her heart. The song reaches a heart-wrenching climax, it then begins to decrescendo, and the speaker regains her composure. Yet she goes beyond this. It seems that the speaker puts on a mask to block out all feeling, so it is fitting that Mulholland indicates the last line should be sung "detached." It seems that the heart has disappeared or died, because it could not forget.

As Dickinson was a mysterious person, so is her poetry enigmatic. While I have not attempted to pin down and analyze every nuance and word, I have tried to give a general idea of the mood and the language that comes alive through oral presentation of her poems, whether by reading or singing. In this recital, we will relive the union that poetry and song once commonly shared.

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PROGRAM NOTES
HONORS THESIS RECITAL
LISA BREWSAUGH
NOVEMBER 1, 1992

288

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you--Nobody--Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise--you know!

How dreary--to be--Somebody!
How public--like a Frog--
To tell one's name--the livelong June--
To an admiring Bog!

1593

There came a Wind like a Bugle--
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost--
The Doom's electric Moccasin
That very instant passed--
On a strange Mob of panting Trees
And Fences fled away
And Rivers where the Houses ran
Those looked That lived--that Day--
The Bell within the steeple wild
The flying tidings told--
How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World!

214

I taste a liquor never brewed--
From Tankards scooped in Pearl--
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air--am I--
And Debauchee of Dew--
Reeling--thro endless summer days--
From inns of Molten Blue--

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door--
When Butterflies--renounce their "drams"--
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats--
And Saints--to windows run--
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the--Sun--

248

Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing--too loud?
But--I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me--
Just--once--more--
Just--see--if I troubled them--
But don't--shut the door!

Oh, if I--were the Gentlemen
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And they--were the little Hand--that knocked--
Could--I--forbid?

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By souls of sanity
The shutting of the eye.

Sleep is the station grand
Down which, on either hand
The hosts of witness stand!

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That shall Aurora be--
East of Eternity--
One with the banner gay--
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When you have done, pray tell me
That I may straight begin!
Haste! lest while you're lagging
I remember him!

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And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading--treading--till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through--

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum--
Kept beating--beating--till I thought
My mind was going numb--

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space, began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here--

#1

f I'm no - bod - y! Who are you? —
f I'm no - bod - y! Who are you?
f I'm no - bod - y! Who are you? —
f I'm no - bod - y! Who

rit.
 Are you no - bod - y too? — No - bod - y?
 Are you no - bod - y too? —
 Are you no - bod - y too? —
 are — you? Are you no - bod - y too?

#2

mp In - e - bri - ate of air am I, And deb - au - chee of dew,
mp *p* *mf dim.*

mp *cresc.* *f*
 Reel - ing through end - less sum - mer days
p *cresc.* *ecstatically f*
con ped.

#3

Quite fast ($\text{♩} = 104$)*f freely*

VOICE

There came a wind like a

PIANO

Red.

*

Red.($\text{♩} = 112$)

bu - gle,

* *Red.*

#4

*accl.**rit*

Could I for-bid, could I for-bid, could I for-bid.....

#5

The shut-ting of the eye

#6

The break - ing of the day,

#7

rit. - - - broader

..... Kept tread - ing, tread - ing, tread - ing till it seemed

ritardando - - - Slower (♩ = 62)

..... that sense was break - ing through (exaggerate the

f (thud-like)

#8

....exaggerate the

ff (thud-like)

mf ($\text{♩} = 60$)

first beat of each measure) And when they all were seat - ed A ser - vice like a

mf, ma marc.

8 *(secco)* 8 8 8

drum Kept beat - ing, beat - ing, beat - ing till I thought my

mind was go - ing numb.

#9

p 3

p I re - mem - ber him I re - men - ber him.

slower 3 3 *p*